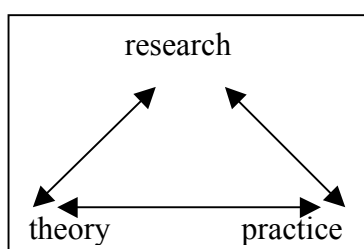




Research stands in a reciprocal relationship to theory construction on the one hand and practice on the other. Theory construction is one of the aims of research, but at the same time, any research approach is also theory-laden. The ultimate aim of both theory and research is to improve control of practical issues, which means improving practice. Thus, research, theory and practice can be said to stand in a triangular relationship in which each construct has an impact on and is influenced by the other two constructs.



Our field of learner autonomy, however, seems to be beset by problems and deficits in all three components of the triangle.

As regards *theory* construction, Rebecca Oxford only recently has stated that it is “far from coherent” (2003:75). Although she claims (*ibid.*) to have come up with a more “systematic model of L2 learner autonomy”, the four suggested “perspectives” she proposes lack one essential ingredient of a model: the interrelationships between the various components are not indicated. Many researchers believe, for example, that the psychological dimension is more basic than the others, since it can be argued that - say - the technical component is a possible tool in the service of providing opportunities for the exercise of autonomy. There are good arguments for claiming that this follows from underlying psychological features.

In his (2007) report on the 9th Nordic Workshop on Developing Learner Autonomy, Hugh Nicoll quotes Turid Trebbi's question: “Why after 30 years of theorizing, is there so little autonomy in our classrooms?”, which is to say, in *practice*. The reasons are probably difficult to pin down, and, yet, the answer to that question should be among the most pressing concerns in our field, and the answer presupposes intensive research endeavours.

Turid's question, however, implies another - equally pressing - concern: “Why is so little *research* on autonomy carried out, if research in a given empirical field is to be understood as the systematic collection and analysis of data with the aim of constructing a theory and/or of providing empirical evidence for the validity of theoretical assumptions or hypotheses. So far, it is generally the case that “research on autonomy to date has been based on reflection and reasoning” (Benson 2001:182) - if that can be called research proper, though.

When it comes to the notion of classroom research, the focus is, without doubt, on practice and its improvement, and it is here that the concept of ‘action

research’ plays a dominant role. This notion “directs attention to the importance of empirical data as a basis for reflectively improving practice” (Ellis 1991: 51). And what is more, action research encourages teachers and learners to become involved in the improvement of their own practice and thus come to view themselves as participants in the research undertaking.

However, if the goal of action research in the autonomous context is identified only with “to help learners to become more autonomous” (Benson 2001: 183), then action research does not seem to be enough. Notions of “more” or “less” autonomous, for example, presuppose an elaborated model of autonomy, which is lacking, and which cannot be based on action research in the first place.

Furthermore, David Little (2007) reminds us that target language use and proficiency is the goal of all language learning, that is, also of the autonomous classroom. The superiority of autonomous learners is postulated in one of Benson's hypotheses about autonomous learning, but how can we be sure? The hypothesis “lacks empirical support”, and there is a “pressing need for empirical research” (2001: 183).

However, the assessment of the learners' linguistic achievement and successes cannot be carried out by action research, thus emphasizing the need for a combination of various research approaches and data collection techniques, all of which need to be carefully assessed in terms of their reliability and validity, that is, in terms of their weaknesses and strengths. It is here that the scrutinizing microscope of the worm researcher comes in. A unitary research approach is precluded by the host of research issues which link classroom procedures, processes, and outcomes with determining factors such as learner and teacher variables within the wider socio-political context.

But where should the search for more definite answers begin? Perhaps by ascertaining the validity of Turid's claim that “there is little autonomy in our classrooms”. Turid is probably right; but again we need to ask: “How do we know?” Since the term and concept of autonomy is fragmented and semantically fuzzy, there might be many classrooms which have implemented principles and procedures of autonomy, even if the people involved do not apply the label ‘autonomy’. By contrast, many of us have experienced the way some teachers explicitly claim to run an autonomous classroom, although they have not in actual fact managed to ‘let go’ and pass over responsibility to their learners.

There is a general lack of knowledge when it comes to the question: How many classrooms have implemented principles of autonomy? And if there are such classrooms, a host of research questions arise:

- Where do we find these classrooms, and what are the institutional frameworks within which they operate?
- To what extent are the procedures determined by curricular guidelines and cultural variables?

- What do the classrooms actually look like? What kind of activities are the learners involved in?
- What opportunities for taking over responsibility and for taking control do they offer?
- How do learners in these classrooms exploit these opportunities and thus construct their own agendas? What amount of variability can be observed?
- How are the various classroom procedures and learning processes interrelated? How do individual learning styles and preferences determine the learning processes?
- etc.

There is a host of questions which await answers and call for the scrutinizing microscope. The field of enquiry and some of the research desiderata can perhaps be systematized along the following lines:

- **Survey research**, which includes the wider socio-political context of autonomous classes and curricular guidelines which allow for the implementation of autonomous principles. Are the teachers in - say - Norway more encouraged to introduce autonomous principles than - say - teachers in Switzerland? The prototypical data gathering technique would be *questionnaires*, which then would have to be complemented by interviews and observations.
- **Teacher variables**, and their motivations for introducing autonomy and perhaps their reasons for effecting changes in their teaching, and the way they went about it. It is here that *first person narratives* will provide valuable insights (Naoko Aoki will address this in a later response to this article)
- **Learner variables**, and learners' strategic approaches. By the time classroom learning begins, children's attitudes have already been influenced by former learning experiences. Some of them have perhaps been exposed to innumerable demands and pressures which may have suffocated their 'natural learning tendencies'. This means that insights into the learning history of classroom learners will facilitate interpretations of their interactions. Apart from observations, analysis of learner logbooks and so on, it is *transcripts of stimulated recall protocols* which have, in the past, proved most useful.
- **Setting or context variables**, which include self-access systems and online-learning opportunities, which might facilitate the implementation of autonomous principles. (Klaus Schwienhorst will address this in a later response to this article). The setting

would also include cultural factors and their impact on autonomy.

- **Developmental aspects** of autonomy: Are analytical and statistical means applicable for trying to assess degrees of autonomy and/or differential success as regards components of the complex construct 'autonomy'? (Jose Lai will address this in a later response to this article).
- **Methodological approaches** like CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) which might turn out to be congenial to autonomy and could support its development (Dieter Wolff will address this in a later response to this article)
- **Learning outcomes**: Since educational and political authorities have to be convinced of the effectiveness of learner autonomy, it is crucially important to show that language learning outcomes are at least not inferior – and preferably superior - to more conventional approaches.

Classroom research in the narrow sense of the term would, however, focus on the analysis of the interactive processes between the teacher and her learners and between the learners in regular language classes. Since all language learning derives from the way language is used in the classroom (cf. Ellis 1990), the analysis of communicative interactions will throw light on the learners' linguistic development.

It is here that the descriptive apparatus of Discourse Analysis will provide valuable categories for the analysis of data. It can be assumed that traditional notions like 'academic task structure' and 'social participation structure' (cf. Erickson 1982) and their statistical distribution will bring to light specific communicative features of autonomous classrooms - especially when they are linked to notions like authentic vs. pedagogic ('didactic') discourse. Leni Dam's classroom might be at one end of a continuum in so far as she did not ask any question which she could answer herself. However, given the fact that there are many different types of display questions (cf. van Lier 2001) - some of which also trigger the learners' deep processing of the language - this might be a feature of variability in autonomous classrooms.

However, discourse data even from regular language classrooms are notoriously difficult to come by - not least for technical and organizational reasons. The problems in autonomous settings are intensified, since many learners and groups of learners typically work on different projects simultaneously. Recordings thus tend to focus on certain groups of learners while having to ignore others, which allows for limited insights into the overall lessons as such.

The host of research questions and the host of variables involved in elucidating processes and products in autonomous language learning calls for triangulation as a data-gathering approach. This

concept implies that no single type of data will allow us to come nearer the ‘truth’, but that the object of enquiry has to be approached from various angles and perspectives and that a variety of research tools need to be applied. This means that classroom research is a highly ‘hybrid activity’...

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Culture



## Autonomy and Cultural Chauvinism

*Adrian Holliday*

The issue of autonomy has often been connected with the individualism-collectivism dimension in cultural difference. These terms come originally from Hofstede’s definitions of cultural difference. Triandis (2004: x-xi) has developed them and suggests that people from individualist cultures perceive themselves as autonomous. They prioritize such things as personal goals, self-reliance, having lots of choices and having fun. They are open to new experiences and are good at making new relationships.

In contrast, people from collectivist cultures perceive themselves primarily as group members with strong group loyalty and interdependence, and therefore consider that silence is a virtue. Face is derived from the group, and they are satisfied with very few choices.

The problem with the individualism-collectivism dimension can be seen in the following description, which is based on a range of ethnographic experience: